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Using 'ironic personae' to make sense of complicated issues

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Abstract

Irony and humor play an important role in both organizing and organizations, because they both help to collide and contrast ideas as well as mitigate and moderate criticism. Our empirical observations of a senior management team suggest participants frequently use verbal irony and aggressive conversational humor through ‘ironic personae’ – a cast of characters, real or imaginary – as a vehicle for pragmatically making sense of complicated topics. We show how ironic personae perform three functions: (i) testing new positions on topics in a non-committal way; (ii) stretching the frame of comparison of a group; and (iii) aligning shared understanding and commitment. Thus, our analysis sheds light on an underexplored and undertheorised aspect of irony that serves as a pragmatic vehicle for the expression of humorous verbal irony and aggressive conversational humor.

[130 words]

Highlights

- This paper identifies a pragmatic ‘vehicle’ – *ironic personae* – that can enable the expression of humorous verbal irony and aggressive conversational humor within team conversations.
- These ironic personae provide a vehicle for participants to position themselves and others, through humorous verbal irony and aggressive conversational humor, in ways that allow them to make sense of complex and controversial topics.
- Our analysis shows how ironic personae are used as a pragmatic vehicle to: i) tentatively test new positions on complex and controversial topics; ii) stretch frames of comparison by which those positions are judged; and iii) align participant understanding around a group position towards a topic.
- We conceptualise and operationalise the functions of ironic personae and show how they are deployed, utilising the metaphor of the carnival to reveal how heteroglossic texts of conversational interaction supplement discourse analytical approaches.

1. Introduction

This paper arose out of an ethnographic study of monthly executive board strategy meetings in a multinational firm. A recurrent observation was that irony and humor frequently featured in the discussion of strategic issues during those meetings. In an attempt to make sense of how these interactional cues might influence such discussions, we examined the individual explanations for the functions of irony among the organizational and communication literatures – such as a means for

participants to (dis)associate themselves from speech acts (Bakhtin, 1984a; Brown and Levinson, 1987; Cooren, 2010, 2012; Dynel, 2014; Haugh, 2007; Kotthoff, 2003) and to approach complex and emotionally charged issues (Hatch, 1997; Jarzabkowski and Lê, 2017; Lynch, 2009; Tracy et al., 2006), enable bonding, solidarity and identity construction in the workplace (Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 1997; Lynch, 2009), and as a means to express resistance (Collinson, 1988; Rodrigues and Collinson, 1995) and deploy power in interaction (Holmes, 2000; Holmes and Stubbe, 2015). However, those explanations individually or collectively, have failed, we argue, to fully capture the dynamic of how irony and humor were actually realised and co-constructed in these executive team meetings. We observed, for example, that specific interactional cues were only partially explained by conventional accounts of irony. Accordingly, we demonstrate in great detail how ‘ironic personae’ facilitate the discussion of complex and controversial topics. Here, we define ‘ironic personae’ as a pragmatic vehicle which facilitates the use of humorous verbal irony and aggressive conversational humor. We assume that ironic personae can affect how complex and controversial issues resonate and are thus responded to within team meetings.

To conceptually frame our study, we draw upon the concepts of personae (Johnstone, 2009: 34-5; Lebold, 2007: 58; Meddaugh, 2010: 380-81) and Bakhtin’s concept of ‘carnival’ (Bakhtin, 1984a: 101-80; 1984b) to explain the dynamism and impact of extended sequences of irony and humor among a team of executive directors. Specifically, we show that ironic personae are an important pragmatic vehicle for facilitating negotiations in team interactions through three functions. These functions enable speakers to: (i) *test* a new position on a topic that they are discussing yet are unwilling to openly commit to; (ii) *stretch* the frame of evaluation by which they are judged such that their own conduct appears better or more acceptable by comparison; and (iii) *align* team members using irony and humor to draw one or more of the group members back into the orientation the speaker desires. We found that ironic personae are developed interactively within the team and then discarded or stored, and sometimes drawn upon again in later conversation. Hence, ironic personae appear to be a repository that the team can utilize or wrangle over while remaining detached. We therefore focus our paper on how participants co-construct and use ironic personae, and the functions they perform in helping them to make sense of complicated issues.

In the following, we first briefly introduce relevant conventional accounts of verbal irony, before making a necessary distinction between humorous verbal irony and aggressive conversational humor. We then summarize the recent cognitive turn in linguistic studies of irony and humor before elaborating the concepts of 'ironic personae' and the 'carnival'. Following the literature review, we analyse three extracts illustrating our assumptions in detail, drawn from six months of executive board strategy meetings. We conclude by discussing how ironic personae could facilitate negotiations and decision-making processes in organization.

2. Conceptualising ironic personae

2.1 Conventional accounts of irony

While a long-standing subject of scholarly attention (Quintilian, 1920), within pragmatics the study of verbal irony is still impeded by definitional issues (Holmes, 2000: 162-64). Early approaches focused on making distinctions between a myriad of related and overlapping colloquial terms (Attardo, 2010: 1-13), by defining irony as a trope or speech act in which the listener recognises the speaker's intention to express the opposite to what was literally said, through the recognition of ironic markers such as prosody, facial expression, feigned impoliteness and other contextual cues (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 221-2, 262-5; Haverkate, 1990: 78-81; Levin, 1982). These definitions have been problematized both because many instances of irony are not declarative statements, as well as for the difficulty in identifying what is being opposed (Kaufer, 1981: 507).

Two approaches – one based on the violation of the Gricean maxims and the other focused on irony as an echoic statement – were developed in response to this critique. To explain differences other than opposition, the Standard Pragmatic Model (SPM) proposed a multi-stage process in which listeners first develop non-ironic understandings of utterances, then realise the inappropriateness of their meanings as a result of pragmatic cues, and finally reinterpret them to identify new meanings that reconcile apparent violations of Grice's maxim of quality with Grice's cooperative principle (Grice, 1975: 53-54; 1978: 123-25; Searle, 1969: 57-71; Searle, 1979: 60-61). SPM however, has been criticised because empirical studies have detected neither the longer comprehension times that the model would predict for ironic versus non-ironic utterances (Gibbs, 1986) nor instances of irony that violate Gricean maxims other than quality (i.e. quantity, relation, or manner) (Attardo, 2000a: 798-

801; Kaufer, 1981: 502). A number of perspectives including the graded salience hypothesis (Giora, 1995, 1997; Giora et al., 1998), the insincere speech act (Amante, 1981; Brown, 1980; Haverkate, 1990; Kreuz and Glucksberg, 1989), and the contrast account (Colston, 2002; Colston and O'Brien, 2000a, b) have been proposed to address these shortcomings of early Gricean accounts, such as proposed by the SPM.

The second approach – Sperber and Wilson's (1981) echoic mention theory – argued that "[t]he speaker echoes a thought she attributes to someone else, while dissociating herself from it with anything from mild ridicule to savage scorn" (Wilson and Sperber, 1992: 60). Clark and Gerrig (1984) developed the 'pretence theory of irony' in which the speaker performs as an "injudicious person speaking to an uninitiated audience", in order that the hearer is able to readily "discover the pretence of the utterance... [so as to...] see through to the true attitude of the speaker" (121). Kreuz and Glucksberg (1989: 382-4) maintained that irony served to reference or remind others of widely held beliefs or norms, while demonstrating that those beliefs are wrong, so as to allow the speaker to distance themselves from that view in a face-saving way. More recent formulations attempt to reconcile Gricean and voicing approaches. Dynel (2014: 623) for example, has suggested two simple conditions as the 'acid test' of irony: that the utterance is overtly untruthful, and that it implies a negative evaluation.

Given that irony can be used for many social functions – to construct group affiliation, display sophistication, evaluate, retract statements, and as a politeness strategy (see Attardo, 2000b for overview) – comprehensively listing irony's myriad context-dependent meanings tends to be a vacuous task because it can be used to express almost any meaning and social function that can also be accomplished by other linguistic and pragmatic means (Attardo, 2002: 175). The difficulty is that so much depends on who is involved, the specific context of interaction, and how it unfolds (Gibbs et al., 2014: 592).

Much research on verbal irony therefore focuses on developing accounts that describe how it is comprehended and explained relative to important rhetorical tropes, like metaphors (Haverkate, 1990; Kaufer, 1981), and how it can be used in place of other linguistic means (Colston, 2017: 246-47). Attardo (2002) argues that these accounts of irony are still useful because they explain various aspects of its inferential and abductive nature. While other accounts of irony are based on violations

of Gricean Maxims and other variants (see Attardo, 2000a; Colston, 2017 for further detail and overview), they are nonetheless dependent on strict rule-based conditions and thus fail to provide a general explanation of why irony is used in specific contexts and its main effects (Alba Juez, 1995), as well as how different instances of irony relate to each other (Attardo, 2013; Utsumi, 2000). That is why scholars have begun to examine how irony is developed through interactional embodiment and cognitive behaviour, which we will examine later, and how irony can be disambiguated from conversational humor, which we turn to in the following.

2.2 Irony, humor and politeness

Within scholarship on humor, irony is often defined as a subset with various semantic realizations (Attardo, 2002: 166; 2010: 334). Although irony and humor are linguistically distinct, and not all verbal irony is humorous (Ritchie, 2005; Veale et al., 2006: 282-84), there is a significant overlap between these phenomena (Gibbs et al., 2014: 587-91). For instance, a study of talk among friends found that over half of ironic utterances either followed or occurred at the same time as laughter (Bryant, 2010).

Humor functions through frame substitution with the speaker intentionally misleading the hearer towards one semantic frame, before abruptly substituting it with a different script to deliver a punchline (Attardo, 2000a). Irony by contrast, operates through a process of negation in which the literal meaning of the utterance is intentionally negated for another meaning. Humor is therefore both a semantic and a pragmatic phenomenon, while irony is entirely pragmatic and lacking a semantic counterpart (Attardo, 2002: 167-69; Gurillo and Ortega, 2013: 5; Rodríguez-Rosique, 2013: 27-29).

This is why Dynel (2009: 1285) distinguishes between two broad categories of verbal humor: the 'canned' joke which consists of a set-up and a punchline; and 'conversational humor', which semantically contributes to the speaker's message and is often integral to the conversation. While a review of the myriad forms of conversational humor are beyond the scope of this paper (see Dynel, 2009 for overview), it is worth emphasising that aggressive forms of humor – such as banter, teasing and sarcasm – often overlap with irony (Gibbs et al., 2014: 587-91) and are therefore frequently mistaken for and elided with humorous irony (Leech, 2014: 241). Largely, Dynel (2014: 619-22)

argues, this mistake often arises because of poor methodological and definitional rigor – in particular concerning the relationship of irony and humor to forms of politeness.

Building upon Grice, Leech (1983) distinguished between irony as “an apparently friendly way of being offensive (mock-politeness)” (144) and banter as “an offensive way of being friendly (mock-impoliteness)” (144). While also drawing on Grice’s (1975) theory of conversational implicature, Brown and Levinson (1987: 61-64) launched a theory of politeness based on the concept of ‘face’ as the public self-image that all individuals sought to protect and maintain, and ‘face threatening acts’ (FTAs) which they defined as “acts that by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or of the speaker” (65). Irony can be understood as a friendly strategy for controlling “aggression away from the brink of conflict” (Leech, 1983: 144) through the covert expression of FTAs, while banter and other forms of aggressive humor can be seen as a strategy that merely appears offensive, but uses politeness for “establishing or maintaining a bond of familiarity” (ibid).

Leech’s distinction between aggressive forms of humor such as banter and humorous irony can be illustrated by the following examples. When greeting an old friend which one has not seen for some time with the greeting, “You’ve gotten fat!”, this could be understood as banter because in the absence of context, it appears to be an FTA, but is actually mock-impoliteness in that its real purpose is not to cause offence but rather to express the strength of existing familial bonds between the speaker and hearer. Alternatively, one might greet an old friend who has obviously gained weight since your last meeting by saying, “I see you’ve maintained your svelte figure!” This utterance can be understood as ironic rather than humorous because of its mock-politeness in which a negative evaluation is expressed by an insincere complement.

While the definitional boundaries around and between aggressive conversational humor and verbal irony remain blurred and contested (see Jobert and Sorlin, 2018; Simonin, 2018), we suggest that both irony and humor rely on non-literal meanings and thus can share a degree of metapragmatic purpose – one of which is the ability to facilitate conversation around complex and controversial issues. Regardless of whether this in-group conversational dynamic serves to ‘bond’ or ‘bite’ (Boxer and Cortés-Conde, 1997: 292-93), we propose that both humorous irony and aggressive humor enable speakers to broach complex and controversial issues in ways that are less

risky to the speaker and listener(s) – a salient characteristic that we elaborate in our discussion of ironic personae below.

2.4 Cognitive and embodied accounts of irony

Drawing upon ‘prototype theory’, some scholars propose that irony could be conceptualized as a prototypical ‘template’ (Attardo, 2013: 39-47; García and Ortega, 2010: 55; Kalbermatten, 2006: 9; Rosique, 2009: 50-57; Utsumi, 2000: 1777-79). Prototype theory contends that we understand categories in terms of a central prototype and thus make a holistic evaluation of how an observed example belongs to a concept through a holistic evaluation of ‘family resemblances’¹ (Rosch, 1999; Wittgenstein, 1967). From this point of view, the closer an utterance is to an ironic prototype, the quicker it is processed (Pexman et al., 2010). This view has gained traction in the past decade because of its ability to bring together other approaches to irony and address their shortcomings. Such prototypical features include irony’s ability to help speakers i) be assertive or insincere (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 69; Brown, 1980; Levin, 1982); ii) convey alternate meanings (Amante, 1981; Giora, 1995; Schaffer, 1982); and iii) express negative or positive evaluations (Giora et al., 1998; Haverkate, 1990; Roy, 1977).

More recently, irony has been defined as a way of directly triggering neural processes (Storms et al., 2000) in the listener’s mind, in the same way as the fingering of keys or a clacking noise might affect a neural response (Bergen, 2012). From this perspective, the role of irony goes beyond semantic recognitions to extend to the stimulation of ‘feelings’, including sensory or motor movements (Colston, 2017: 245-46; Gibbs, 2006; Hauk and Tschentscher, 2013). Newcombe et al (2012) for example, found that independent of context, subjects recognized words associated with concrete body-object interaction faster than those connected with more abstract emotional meanings.

2.5 Performative accounts of irony

A further barrier to achieving a comprehensive account of irony is the difficulty of capturing its complex effects even when combining textual episodes, personal histories, and the context in which

¹ A prototype for the cognitive category of bird for example might be something similar to a robin. Rather than a list of necessary and sufficient conditions (e.g. has wings, can fly, is warm blooded, etc.) we examine an observed example holistically for similarities. In this case, a finch and an ostrich would both be classified as birds, the former would be considered closer to the prototype and thus more ‘birdlike’.

it occurs (Alba Juez, 1994). Arguably, conventional linguistic studies have focused too much on individual utterances in artificial situations (Gibbs Jr and Colston, 2007) rather than holistic evaluations of how it is “most clearly revealed by investigation of its basic site: conversation” (Clift, 1999, p.523).

Unsurprisingly then, a growing body of linguistic and organizational research focuses on how irony is performed in specific contexts. Clift (1999) synthesised Bakhtin’s (1984b: 185-86) and Goffman’s (1974) respective concepts of *voicing* and *footing* to explain how ironic utterances can enable speakers to shift the footing of conversation. Priego-Valverde (2009) illustrates how irony facilitates a ‘double-coded’ discourse to be voiced so that speakers can distance themselves from the consequences of their speech acts. ‘Voicing’ also occurs in the use of irony between children and adults. Kotthoff (2009), for example, observed how nine-year old children were able to use irony to affect a polyphonic role-performance in which multiple stances created an in-group with the adults so as to acknowledge and ‘play’ with their knowledge and attitudes. Meddaugh (2010: 380-81) suggested that ‘The Colbert Report’ – a satirical news programme featuring an opinionated and conservative anchor host – could be better understood as a ‘persona’ that captures incongruities discursively, also via para-linguistic and verbal cues.

Moreover, Lebold (2007) defined personae as “an enclosed structure with an internal coherence, an artifact composed of signs, codes, and discourses” (57). Irony can be communicated as ‘embodied personae’, be they fictional or non-fictional identities. While both stance and personae serve to represent identity in discourse, Johnstone (2009: 34-5) preferred to distinguish between them, defining the former as a projection of knowledge and moral authority drawing on one’s unique life, and the latter as a transient and malleable *identity* that arises in response to the rhetorical demands of the moment, indexed by metapragmatic and non-linguistic cues (Silverstein, 1993: 35). Lebold (2007) used this ‘embodied personae approach’ to conceptualise the poetry and performances of Bob Dylan’s songs by integrating competing personae in his lyrics and public appearances to engage audiences. The main advantage of this approach is that while stances are dependent on how others view their authenticity (Johnstone, 2009), personae act more like a ‘mask’ that can be quickly donned, readily articulated, and easily parodied, deconstructed, or discarded by speakers (Lebold, 2007; Meddaugh, 2010).

In the next section, we consider the role of a ‘carnavalesque’ context in enabling the emergence of these embodied personae.

2.6 The carnival and ironic personae within organization

Some organization scholars have explored humor and irony as a means to comprehend organizational reality. Mulkey (1988) suggested organizations have serious (and literal) as well as humorous (and ironic) modes of discourse. The serious mode is often found lacking because it assumes a “single, coherent, and organized reality” (p.218). The ironic mode overcomes this deficiency by telling better stories about the conflicts involved in comprehending reality (Johansson and Woodilla, 2005: 225-6) and its attendant ambiguities and paradoxes (Hatch, 1997; Hatch and Ehrlich, 1993; Jarzabkowski and Lê, 2017).

That said, we have known for some time that irony and humor are often used as means to subvert and resist organization (Westwood and Johnston, 2013). Therefore, several studies have developed Bakhtin’s theory of the carnival as a festival, show or celebration (Bakhtin, 1984a: 101-80; 1984b) and Goffman’s metaphor of organization as theater (Goffman, 1974: 127-135). Boje, Luhman and Cunliffe (2003), for example, argued that individuals use irony to invoke a sense of the carnival – within which individuals are able to criticise dominant power structures. By contrast, Beyes and Steyaert (2006) proposed that the postmodern carnivalesque spectacle of theater would allow understanding of the staged aspect of organizational life. Rhodes (2001) also adopts a Bakhtinian perspective to examine how an organization invoking the carnival draws out individual experiences through the implementation of a quality management programme. Similarly, Boje and Rhodes (2006) analysed how McDonald’s employed the Ronald McDonald persona as a carnivalesque clown that provokes and transgresses the official corporate narrative, while at the same time reinforcing and extending corporate power.

Kolodziej-Smith (2014), however, criticises many of these previous studies for their allegedly simple division between actors who are either powerful or powerless. Hence, he calls for closer analysis of the characters’ utterances – especially their use of irony and sarcasm, which he argues will help scholars “to discover a more complex language of power and oppression in organizational studies... showing how communicative exchanges within organizations draw upon and perpetuate

discourses beyond the immediate context” (p.89). We now briefly turn to a closer reading of these root concepts to finalise the theoretical framing of our study.

The Bakhtinian notion of *carnavalesque* builds upon the concepts of ‘heteroglossia’ and ‘grotesque realism’. Bakhtin (1982) distinguished written novels from other classical forms of literature, such as poetry, for their use of heteroglossia – the presence of two or more expressed viewpoints in a text or other artistic work – through which the author expresses “another’s speech in another’s language... [to provide a]... double-voiced discourse. It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions” (324). It allows, for example, the possibility of contradictory moral behaviours where the same individual or institution can possess and act upon both good and evil tendencies. Heteroglossia’s double-voicing effect therefore reflects and engenders the “interaction of several consciousnesses” (Bakhtin, 1984b: 18). The notion of the carnival thus implies that it is never finalised, since voices are never fully silenced nor issues entirely resolved (Morson and Emerson, 1990: 88-91). This on-going critique is reflected in Bakhtin’s (1984a: 25-58) notion of ‘grotesque realism’ which captures the profanity of the world with reference to bodily orifices and parts (Koepping, 1985: 212-14).

Using these underlying concepts, Bakhtin (1984b: 122-30) distinguished between *four characteristics* of the carnivalesque: free interaction, eccentric behaviour, *mésalliance*, and profanation. In a carnivalesque environment, participants tend to be liberated from group affiliations, feeling free to engage in ‘unsuitable marriages’ (*mésalliances*) and other expressions of unity. Such an environment allows individuals to engage in what are, arguably, more natural and eccentric behaviours that are unconstrained by consequences. For Bakhtin, therefore, the carnival was a truly creative event that transcended spectacle because of its inclusive nature, with ranks often being inverted and roles exchanged as “kings are uncrowned and beggars crowned” (Morson and Emerson, 1990: 407). In a carnival, the world is turned upside-down as all voices are granted equal status such that in some antagonistic contexts, it can become “a catalyst and site of actual and symbolic struggle” (Stallybrass and White, 1986: 14).

We suggest that the Bakhtian notions of heteroglossia and grotesque realism provide us with an important insight into ironic and humorous exchanges in organizations. Thus, key aspects of these conceptual approaches to irony – as a prototypical category, an interactional accomplishment,

and as a means for paradox and resistance to be voiced, could, we argue, be integrated into the concept of 'ironic personae' as a pragmatic vehicle for using humorous irony and aggressive humor. Such embodiment of irony in personae, we assume, aid participants to articulate, mock and deconstruct specific strategic aims within organizational settings. Our key focus then, is concerned with the linguistic/pragmatic forms and functions that are used to realize these ironic personae in specific organizational contexts. Accordingly, we developed the following guiding questions:

- 1) How do participants construct and make use of ironic personae in team conversations?
- 2) How do ironic personae enable participants to make sense of complicated or complex issues?

3. Design, case setting and methods

3.1 Case Setting

Accordingly, we analysed data from our longitudinal field research in the aerospace firm Defense Systems International (DSI), a multinational company being challenged to respond to a substantial environmental change in the form of major cuts in governments' defense budgets around the world. All-day monthly senior management team meetings were observed and recorded over a six-month period, providing over 48 hours of interactive discussion, supplemented with notes from our own observations, meeting documents and interviews with some of the main participants individually before and after the meetings. The meetings and interview data therefore amounted to c.150 hours in total, but we focused primarily on the 48 hours of text of the six days of monthly meetings of each business unit using the other collected data (and genres) to aid our understanding of the sociological context of utterances, while drawing on the Discourse-Historical Approach to Critical Discourse Studies, as elaborated below. In Table 1, we list the organizational roles of the senior team members and the invited participants in the illustrative episodes referred to in this paper.

3.2 Discourse Analysis

We adopted the Discourse-Historical Analytical approach (DHA) which aims to reveal how power relationships are structured and practiced through discourse by using a multi-level contextual, in-depth analysis of the specific interactions over a clearly defined time period within which the discussion takes place (see Clarke et al., 2012; Reisigl and Wodak, 2016; Wodak, 2011; Wodak et

al., 2011). We integrated our ethnographic fieldwork with the textual analysis, within an awareness of genre expectations (Wodak, 2013). Our larger project required us to create narrow transcripts of turn-by-turn discussions within executive meetings in the company. In analysing them we considered four layers of context (Wodak, 2011: 38-9): a) the genre of the meeting as a specific form of social interaction (Yates and Orlikowski, 1992: 302-3), b) the institutional history of the company, and c) structures of multinational companies in general, and the professional narratives (e.g. Finance, Human Relations, Operations) and roles of those participating in the meeting, and d) the recent professional history of the executive board and its members. This is how we acquainted ourselves with the intertwining histories and discourses that made up the contextual resources of the meetings.

Board of Directors of DSI Australia	
Mike	CEO of DSI Australia
Bradley	Chief Operating Officer (COO)
Harris	Director of Finance
Adam	Director of Human Resources
Larry	Director of Engineering
Greg	Director of Contracts and Procurement
Will	Director of the Osprey Programme
Charlie	Director of the Peregrine Programme
Henry	Director of Manufacturing

Table 1 – Board of Director Meeting Participants

3.3 Methods

We carried out our analysis through a process of abductive inquiry (Locke et al., 2008: 908-10) that consisted of three stages and working back-and-forth between data, research questions, theoretical assumptions, and our notes to explore potential patterns of interaction, following typical stages in ethnographic research as well as in discourse analysis coping with large data corpora (Baker, 2009; Krzyżanowski, 2011; Rheindorf, 2019).

- i) **Preliminary analysis.** Given our objective of understanding how groups make sense of issues they are faced with in the dynamic of conversation, we reviewed meeting episodes where substantive organizational issues were being discussed. Through this iterative process of examining and coding these episodes (Feldman et al., 2004: 165; Miles and

Huberman, 1984) we noticed that extended episodes of ironic humor and aggressive conversational humor often preceded critical junctures in which the framing of these topics and thus individuals' positions in relation to the topic appeared to shift. This shift was manifested in how individuals softened their positions or even switched from opposition to support – or vice versa – on the issue. Short of direct statements, this shift was usually marked by the use of conciliatory statements that acknowledged the validity of other viewpoints and a decreasing modality in defining their own positions. With the assumption that humorous irony and aggressive humor expressed through the pragmatic vehicle of ironic personae had an impact in this shift, we reformed the focus towards expressions of irony and humor as the primary unit of analysis.

- ii) **Downsizing the corpus.** We then examined all episodes of discussion, as defined by a focus on a single topic of discussion, for those discussion sequences in which irony and humor was evident. We adapted Kreuz and Roberts' (1995) approach in reviewing the recordings of the meetings for instances of an overtly insincere tone of voice (e.g. heavy stress, a nasal tone and a slower speaking rate) and hyperbole (i.e. exaggerated or extreme descriptions), to flag text for further analysis. We then examined the text that preceded and followed discussion around these potential incidences to identify discrete episodes of ironic humor.
- iii) **Episode identification.** We then analysed how these expressions of irony were clustered or linked within the conversation, in these selected sequences. We noted several things. First, clusters were often related to adjacent sequences by means of 'running' jokes. Second, initial expressions of irony and humor frequently triggered others to join in with their own jokes. Third, such co-constructed interactions frequently led to the development of fantasy/irreal scenarios or humorous narratives that allowed participants to temporarily 'disconnect' from the more serious agenda topic. Using these three features, we went through several iterations to refine the definition and practical application of these criteria to finally determine 21 distinct 'episodes' of humorous irony

and aggressive humor – summarised in Figure 2 – which we then used for in-depth and
systematic discourse analysis

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Subject	Meeting	Summary
Spectrum	November Board	The team is gauging the insights of the HR ratings of key leadership talent in the company, which indicates that females are under-represented.
US Trip Briefing	November Board	Mike briefs the team on his recent trip to the US where he met with DSI's main joint-project partners to discuss coordination issues.
Meeting Start	November Offsite	Humorous banter to 'break the ice' at the beginning of the meeting.
Swarf	November Offsite	The team grapples with how to deliver a lucrative new contract that involves supplying titanium tail fins for a new aircraft platform.
Land Acquisition	November Offsite	The team discusses an opportunity to acquire land for the purpose of expanding the Edinburgh Parks headquarters.
Edinburgh Parks	November Offsite	The team explores the possibility of expanding the Aberdeen Hills headquarters within their existing land holdings.
Information Architecture	November Offsite	A discussion over how the team can meet the demands of external accreditors for the management of the information processes around key projects, and who the most appropriate executive is to lead the project.
Recruitment Options	November Offsite	The team considers various options for making the firm more attractive to new engineering graduates.
Quarterly Budget	November Offsite	A line-by-line discussion on items of concern in the preparation for presentation of the next quarterly budget proposal to the UK head office.
Meeting Start	January Board	Humorous banter to 'break the ice' at the beginning of the meeting.
Graduate Trainees	January Board	Following on from the previous Recruitment Options discussion, a group of graduates trainees provide feedback on their experiences.
Melbourne Facilities I	January Board	A real estate consultant presents the team with options for relocating their Melbourne Facilities.
Melbourne Facilities II	January Board	The team receives a presentation by a property developer who is seeking an anchor tenant for their new commercial development.
Inappropriate e-mails	February Board	Adam briefs the team on measures taken in response to a inappropriate and explicit emails forwarded by a supervisor to a female employee.
Service Awards	February Board	Fran, a senior HR manager, explains to the team a proposal to change the service award programme for long service employees.
Meeting Start	March Board	Humorous banter to 'break the ice' at the beginning of the meeting.
Annual Salary Increment	March Board	Adam and Fran present the HR Department proposal for performance based salary increments for the coming fiscal year.
Osprey Project	March Board	Will briefs the team on major issues regarding the Osprey project and the team discusses how some of these might be solved or mitigated.
Telford Survey	March Board	The team reacts to the results of a presentation, made by a female HR consultant, on how the company performed relative to other firms.
Annual Budget Review	April Board	The team makes a final review of the annual operating budget for the coming fiscal year in advance of submission to the UK head office.
Resourcing Conflicts	April Board	The team works to mediate a dispute between Will and Charlie over the resourcing of their respective Osprey and Peregrine Programmes.

Table 2 – Summary of Episodes with Ironic Personae

iv) **Issue development.** We then reviewed these episodes with attention to the participation and interaction of individuals, their degree of amusement, and the effect this appeared to have on their respective positions on the issue at hand. Building upon the analysis of four levels of context of this specific interaction (Clarke et al., 2012), we went through several rounds of abductive analysis to eventually develop an understanding of humorous irony and aggressive humor as manifest in the form of ironic personae and a dynamic through which these ironic personae influenced individual positions on the issue by way of three inductively derived functions – testing, stretching, and aligning.

We next draw upon excerpts from our data to illustrate these three functions of our model of ironic personae.

4. Findings

Through an abductive analysis of 21 episodes (see Table 2), we found that ironic personae could be used in three distinct ways to enable teams to deal with complicated and controversial issues. First, we found that ironic personae enabled participants to ‘test’ new positions on issues within the team. Second, they helped them to ‘stretch’ the boundaries of the current situation by juxtaposing it to, and comparing it with unacceptable and even absurd positions, so that speakers could increase their distance from and responsibility for complex issues. Finally, we found that these ironic personae could help ‘align’ certain individuals around a favoured position of an ‘in-group’ through social bonding and, in the process, exclude others. Below, we outline these three functions of ironic personae and illustrate their operation through excerpts drawn from our analysis.

4.1 Testing new positions

At the beginning of many episodes, the discussion on new agenda items were often marked by a palpable tension with a sense of anxiety rooted in uncertainty about how discussions might develop. In response, individuals were often reluctant to explicitly set out their positions on issues before they had a sense of where others stood. They tended to hedge their opinions by establishing alternate tentative positions through humorous irony and aggressive humor. This tentative position often stimulated feedback from others so that the initial speaker was able to reformulate their idea in a

modified and strengthened, as well as potentially more acceptable, way. We call this function ‘testing’ to describe how these speakers engaged in equivocal talk so that the views of others can be gauged and responded to. Using discursive strategies involving politeness, hedging, humorous irony and various forms of aggressive humor, speakers first masked their true intentions – either directly using the voice of, or indirectly inferring the existence of, an ironic persona. The ironic persona were thus a pragmatic vehicle that can be used to stake out alternatives that could be readily dissociated from the emerging consensus of the group as a whole. The creation of ironic personae tended to succeed when supported by laughter from others, and often led to elaboration by the speaker as well as for the creation of further ironic personae positioned as either ‘partners in crime’ with, or a ‘foil’ to, the initial ironic personae. Hence, we found ‘testing’ gives licence for others to easily join in the team conversation.

The following excerpt (see Figure 1), which took place within a discussion about the challenges of machining military aircraft tailfins for a consortium project with several defence contractors, shows an ironic persona being used to ‘test’ if a risky project can be reframed as an opportunity via a discussion around a waste product (swarf). Typically, proceeds from the sale of the swarf (recyclable shavings and other pieces that result from the metal machining process) were used to pay for the company social club – particularly the Christmas party of employees’ children. Swarf consists of a mixture of relatively inexpensive aluminium and steel alloy. This particular project was different however, because it required the precision machining of tailfins made from massive billets of highly expensive titanium alloy.

1	Adam:	Actually it’s a hell of a lot of swarf! [laughter]
2	Mike:	It’s actually [laughter] 90%.
3	Henry:	90-95% of the weight of material ends up as swarf –
4	Bradley:	– social club’s looking good [laughter]
5	Henry:	If we could sell that titanium we’d all be getting red Ferraris for Christmas
6		[laughter]
7	Mike:	Yeah, our kids are all getting racehorses for Christmas.
8	Bradley:	For the benefit of our visitors, the current kids Christmas party is funded by the swarf sales
9		from the machine shop – but not titanium! [laughter]
10	Henry:	Um, this is an area where the parent company has a suitable amount of
11		Expertise, and are not real happy to see that family jewel process go outside, so –

Figure 1 – ‘Ferraris for Christmas’

This excerpt follows at the end of a report by Henry on the challenges of implementing this new production process. Adam (line 1) initiates by exclaiming “It’s a hell of a lot of swarf”, introduced by the adverb “actually” which indicates a new framing of an episode (i.e. in this case, a shift to banter). This is substantiated by the immediate laughter following Adam’s speech act. Mike (line 2) reinforces the frame shift by repeating “actually”, and Henry finishes this first discussion (i.e. the amount of swarf) which then leads Bradley (line 4) to initiate a testing reassessment through his use of absurd humor to suggest that the money for swarf could be used for the “social club”. Bradley’s fantasy (line 4) is then animated into an ironic persona by Henry who explicitly describes what would be possible if they were to personally benefit from the swarf – also using the pronoun “we” twice to further emphase the beneficiaries of this graft (line 5). Mike’s subsequent detailing about “our kids” getting racehorses is further investment into the team ironic persona, therein making the idea sound more realistic (line 7). Henry then grounds the conversation again with a reminder of the precision required to avoid costly mistakes in the production process, via a typical cost-benefit argument (i.e. if swarf is valuable, then the titanium billets are exponentially more so, and a minor mistake could lead to millions of dollars in wasted material) (lines 10-11). As in the previous example, in the arena of the carnival, the vehicle of the ironic personae helps to invert morality and corruption by way of talk around ‘siphoning-off’ lucrative Christmas party funds as seeming possible. Through lines 4-7 then, the common ground for the shared ironic persona is established. This absurd humor is further taken up by others in a co-construction of the ‘corrupt executive board’ in which the executives and their families benefit from the siphoning of funds from the sale of titanium swarf – as a collective persona that unifies and invests the team into the playful chaos of the carnival.

Here, the grotesque emerges through the hedonistic and cinematic imagery of the unreal scenario – not just a car and ponies, but ‘red’ Ferraris and ‘thoroughbred’ racehorses – which brings to mind the extravagant parties of a corrupt and criminal upper-class. This imagery simultaneously implies not only the ‘real’ decency of the executives, but also the value of the ‘waste’ swarf. Hence, the ironic persona of the ‘corrupt executives’ serves as a pragmatic vehicle to allow the swarf to be re-classified and the strategic shift in its management made into a collective enterprise by emphasising what is at stake in this contract with the waste by-product alone (i.e. enough to purchase a fleet of Ferraris and a stable of racehorses). Prompted by the visceral realisation of the

drastic perceived change in value of the swarf, the executives endeavour to reassess the entire project not only in terms of its profitability, but also the risks of such a costly and technically challenging machining process.

To fully appreciate the different levels at which this function of the ironic persona works, we must remind ourselves of what the Bakhtinian carnival affords: a polyvocality and frame shift that frees participants up from conventional roles and rules, and morality. Manifested in the form of corrupt ironic personae, it foregrounds the difference between the world of the carnival and the 'real' world, to the benefit of the executive team. The necessity of Coleridge's (1817) 'suspension of disbelief' – the willingness to momentarily suspend reason and logic for the sake of enjoyment – thus applies to the ironic personae at one level, whilst at another level – and producing the frisson of irony and humor – is that of the 'knowing' onlooker. We therefore enter the carnival as both participants and as observers in a temporary and partial immersion which allows us to celebrate the amoral, whilst at the same time emerging cleaner and more upright.

4.2 Stretching the frame of comparison

We found that ironic personae 'stretched' the frame of comparison by which behaviour is judged, so as to make the speaker's actual position more acceptable by comparison. We term this function 'stretching' because like many other aspects of the carnivalesque, the dominance of these personae is temporary. By entering a carnivalesque frame of reference, where social norms are temporarily suspended, the inappropriate, unacceptable and unrealistic behaviours embodied by these personae encouraged participants to reassess their understandings of an issue and potentially develop new approaches and solutions. This dynamic is apparent in the following excerpt (see Figure 2), which occurred approximately 30 minutes after the preceding excerpt. After the tailfins have been machined, they needed to be chemically treated to resist corrosion. Given that DSI lacked the facilities for chemical treatment, the team had been discussing how to build a new facility to house this process.

1 Adam: Excuse me, will manufacturing be included in this –
2 Will: And this is about environmental stuff, is it?
3 Adam: – cos it's an existing facility.
4 Henry: Yeah, how you treat and handle emissions and effluent and water from the facility. How you
5 construct the facility around safeguards for spillages and the like.
6 Will: So – at the moment, it would be stored and it doesn't matter how?
7 Harris: Yeah, mop it up –
8 Adam: It just goes into the [sewer] main –
9 Charlie: Just next door to [the facility] –
10 [laughter]
11 Henry: [The] flies are just rolling round in it!
12 Adam: Just serve it in the canteen –
13 Larry: Well, it would have to be in the longer term, because that'll tighten up eventually. I'm sure.
14 Adam: – in between [shifts]!
15 Will: Because just seeing it from the corporate governance perspective, at some point in time we'd
16 have to to fix it, wouldn't we? And come up with the – entire new set of rules?
17 Mike: Well, it does meet the requirements that it has to meet.
18 Will: Yeah, yeah, but is that always good enough? You know, if we had a spill, you know, what
19 would that do? This is what – it just begs the question.
20 Henry: Yeah, I meant we've always been on the edge of thinking, 'Wouldn't it be great if we didn't
21 have to do metal treatments, and somebody else could do it?

Figure 2 – 'Mop it up'

Here, an ironic persona we named 'environmental baddies' is created as a characterisation for the whole senior team, in response to Will's quasi-rhetorical questions (i.e. indirect challenges) to DSI's apparent lack of consideration for the environmental implications of this project. Should the facilities and waste handling processes be built to recommended environmental guidelines, which are stricter than the current legal requirements? By taking an enlightened stance and making the criticism (line 2), Will highlights the unfavourable comparison between the team's 'actual' position of legal regulations and the 'ideal' position of recommended guidelines (Figure 3 Part a). Following Adam (line 3), Henry also acknowledges Will's concern as an issue but uses the pronoun "you" to introduce a new social actor into the conversation – it is the corporation DSI that is responsible for emissions and effluent – and to implicitly distance himself from personal responsibility for the 'actual' position (lines 4-5).

In response to further questioning from Will, Harris provokes a frame shift to parody by creating a collective ironic persona that we have named 'environmental baddies', whom are first enacted by Adam and then Charlie (lines 7-9). The moral inversion of the carnival is once again utilised to strategic effect by conjuring images of flies buzzing around cesspools of toxic waste. Here the ironic

persona functions to extend the frame of comparison by providing an alternative 'bad' position from which the team's actual position now appears quite moderate and more distant (Figure 3 Part b).

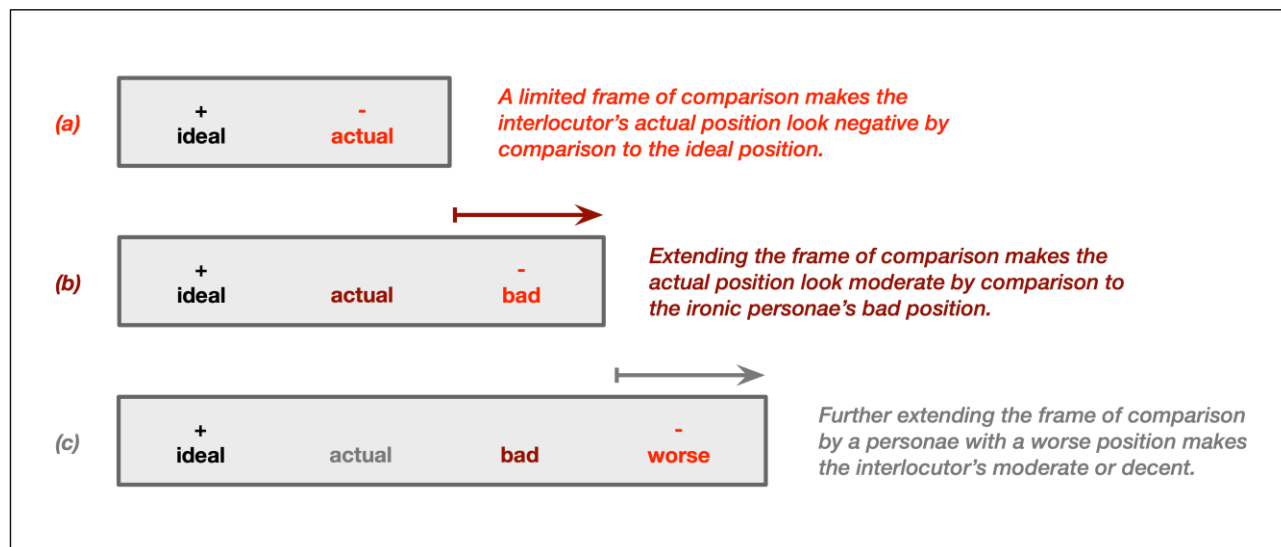


Figure 3 – Stretching the frame of comparison

Adam further extends the frame of comparison, by engaging with the grotesque irreal scenario of toxic waste being fed to their employees during their meal breaks in the company canteen (line 12). By imagining a group not only flagrantly flouting salient environmental laws but going so far (presumably motivated by profit) so as to maliciously poison their own employees (lines 12 and 14) allows for yet another even 'worse' position, further moving the team to an even better position of moderation or even decency (Figure 3 Part c). This persona is all the more grotesque because the person who spoke it, Adam, is the HR director whose role makes him responsible for welfare in DSI employees and its physical buildings. It is the carnival spirit engendered by the ironic personae that allows a playful juxtaposing of 'Jekyll-like' Adam and the 'Hyde-like' environmental baddies for all to see by allowing each team member to voice a parody of their normal responsible selves.

It is also interesting to note that throughout the enactment of the environmental baddies personae (lines 7-12), Harris, Adam, Charlie and Henry repeatedly use the impersonal pronoun "it" – rather than 'I', 'we', 'you', 'they', 'us' – to further distance themselves from personal responsibility for the issue. "It" is their grotesque creation that is ultimately responsible for the 'bad' and 'worse' positions. It is only as the conversation is grounded again in seriousness that the pronoun "I" is again used as Larry interrupts Adam, arguing that while they might not be able to satisfy the recommended

guidelines immediately, they could comply with tightening legal regulations in the longer term (line 13).

Will challenges this again by rhetorically suggesting, that from a corporate governance perspective, they should consider building the new facilities to the recommended guidelines immediately, since the legal regulations will eventually and predictably be tightened. Note how Will implies their collective responsibility by using the pronoun “we” twice in this turn. (lines 15-16). Mike adds that DSI only need to comply with the current legal requirements – again using the pronoun “it” to implicitly push ultimate responsibility back to DSI and governance processes (line 17). Will reinforces the official position again by realizing his strong claims in the form of rhetorical questions, thus again challenging the team’s position (b) with the topos of danger, questioning the adequacy of DSI’s plans for contingent situations such as an accident leading to a spill and emphasizing their personal responsibility again with “we” (lines 18-19). Finally, Henry redirects the conversation by musing a potential resolution to the problem by way of a practical argument – that despite the additional cost of passing the chemical treatment process on to a sub-contractor – it might still be worthwhile because DSI could avoid responsibility for complying with environmental standards, thus making it possible to eventually shift blame to somebody else. In so doing, Henry somewhat reconciles the tension between the collective responsibility of Will’s “we” and the others’ position of responsibility laying with the corporate DSI by musing how “I” wished “we” could pass of the responsibility for “someone else”.

This function of stretching provides a liminal space for suggesting alternatives around which relations to the issue as a whole can be tentatively and playfully (re)negotiated between participants, without falling into a serious and aggressive discussion or conflict. Thus, in the above example, the *status quo* is challenged for failing to adhere to best practice (i.e. a moral failing) but reframed as being on the right moral side (when compared to the ‘bad’ and the ‘worse’ carnivalesque positions) because the issue – unfortunately – persists.

4.3 Aligning participants’ understanding

The third function of ironic personae, ‘aligning’, allows participants to develop a common understanding of the topic and a commitment to it. Participants are encouraged through the use of

humor (allowing for face-saving) to become a member of the 'in-group' (i.e. the consensual view), as opposed to the 'out-group'. We found ironic personae situated participants unambiguously in the out-group and set them against the in-group or vice-versa. The persona here serves as a legitimate 'mask' allowing the critique of outsiders. Clearly, in the tradition of the carnival, masks are extremely important, enabling animated double-voicing. In the same way, an ironic persona, recognised as being such, again gives carnivalesque licence to social mores, such that manners and conventions can be inverted or cast aside.

The extract below from the 'Information Architecture' episode illustrates this aligning process with reference to a new 'information architecture' (a way of ordering and seeing through measures on a company-wide scale) that was being proposed by Bradley (lines 5-9; See Figure 4).

1	Mike:	Information architecture.
2	Bradley:	– Architecture, now, uh, most of you guys have been through this. I've distributed it. I've
3		had some feedback – aah – the only negative feedback I've had is from Greg –
4		[loud laughter and humorous exchange followed by off topic interruption for three turns]
5	Bradley:	Uh, to, just to, to very briefly, summarise Greg's feedback, it concerns the – we're
6		replacing what was a four-committee structure with what is a six-committee structure, and a
7		we are actually growing costbase, uh, as costbase, is pretty much –
8		[further interruption off topic for three turns]
9	Bradley:	So, just a brief –
10	Greg:	It was that [we are] sort of sort of running round a number of committees. Second part was
11		how we invest in things like business solution modelling, and the other sort of stuff that's
12		kicking around in terms of capability working group, etc –
13	Bradley:	Yeah, let me, let me –
14	Greg:	– so that –
15	Bradley:	Let me come to that.
16	Mike:	Mmm , huh.
17	Bradley:	Um, uh, b- well, let me just briefly – Greg's other things will either be captured as a part of
18		this, or they'll be part of the other capability work under CMMI, and, and ISBM so they
19		they'll be within the framework, as initiatives where you actually have to progress,
20		ultimately, to achieve uh the capabilities we've got to have in the business. This is about
21		establishing a start on the infrastructure for our information management.
22	Greg:	Fine.
23	Bradley:	Okay?
24	Greg:	Fine. But but when we go to QBR we're going to be clear about that,
25	Bradley:	We will be
26	Greg:	– and the other initiatives...?
27	Bradley:	We'll be as clear as we can be, yes; we'll be a lot clearer than we have been.

Figure 4 – 'I've had some feedback'

1 The loud laughter from the rest of the group that followed Bradley's introductory statement
2 indicates the glee with which he had forced an unflattering ironic persona onto 'Greg the Dissenter'.
3 By singling out Greg and then teasing him for his dissenting behaviour, Bradley explicitly implied that
4 Greg was likely to experience a significant loss of face. Note that Bradley, as COO, is subordinate
5 in rank only to CEO Mike, and thus uses his power to define the terms of the conversation. The
6 group laughter at the start might have 'permitted' his subsequent controlling and joking manoeuvres
7 (lines 5-7, 9), or at least created an atmosphere of jocularly and bonhomie into which such
8 manoeuvres would be deemed acceptable. Greg first resists by attempting to explain himself (lines
9 10-12, 14), but is cut off twice by Bradley who bluntly interrupts (lines 13 and 15) and then takes
10 over (line 17) in order to explicitly redefine Greg's first suggestions. The ironic persona 'Greg the
11 dissenter' thus reframes the discussion again into a serious and coherent summary of necessary
12 new organisational architecture, a structure that does not allow for other alternatives.

13
14 Greg finally capitulates and acquiesces with a terse response "Fine" (line 22), while
15 acknowledging his agreement by seeking clarification on a particular point (line 24). Bradley
16 concedes this specific detail and – judging by the downward cadence of the last turn – effectively
17 'closed' the negotiation. Here, the carnival functions as the site of team discipline: the unflattering
18 ironic persona being foisted onto Greg, and the interruptions of Greg's conversational turns (lines 12
19 and 14) affording the carnival.

20
21 As illustrated above, ironic personae embolden a carnivalesque atmosphere that prompts
22 individuals to engage and align around feelings and ideas that are otherwise difficult to express in a
23 non-face threatening way, such as by using verbal irony in conversation (see Kwon et al., 2020).
24 This effect enables a dynamic where the in-group leads others to conform, or otherwise remain in
25 the out-group. Ironic personae then, through a repertoire of humorous irony and aggressive humor,
26 make for an effective yet subtle pragmatic vehicle for disciplining, and thus control.

27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65

5. Discussion and conclusion

5.1 Ironic personae as means to make sense of complicated issues in organization

Despite the extensive empirical and theoretical work on verbal irony within the fields of pragmatics and organizational communication, there remains a paucity of understanding of the varied ways by

which forms of humorous irony and aggressive humor facilitate strategic discussions about complicated and controversial issues in organizations (Gylfe et al., 2019; Hatch, 1997; Jarzabkowski and Lê, 2017; Kwon et al., 2020; Lynch, 2009; Tracy et al., 2006). In this paper, we have brought integrated linguistic/pragmatic/cognitive accounts of verbal irony as a prototypical and embodied phenomenon together with organizational studies that approach the workplace as an empirical site for performative and carnivalesque behaviours. By integrating these approaches, we have further developed the concept of ironic personae as a pragmatic vehicle for irony and humor that can influence and facilitate the dynamic interaction between speakers – and thus shown how such ironic personae can help make complicated and controversial issues better understood.

Our abductive analysis reveals how ironic personae perform three distinct but related functions: i) testing out new positions on issues, ii) stretching frames of comparison and iii) aligning understandings. Combined, they enable an emergent interactional dynamic that shapes how the topic of conversation could be understood and how it might be responded to. By so doing, our analysis provides an important missing piece to the use irony in organizations

Ironic personae can also be conceived of as an emergent pragmatic vehicle through which the ‘organizational carnival’ can be made manifest, a periodic and temporary event that occurs within the interactional dynamics of discussion around complicated issues in team-level discussion in organizations. In particular, our analysis reveals specific characteristics of the carnival, including: a) free association and *mésalliances* with the juxtaposition of extreme and often dichotomous elements; b) grotesque realism through continual references to earthy and profane acts within fantasy scenarios; and c) these carnivalesque interactions – not only do personae return in similar or changed guises to animate subsequent conversations, but they also seem to create space within the ongoing discourse of the organization. Thus, our analysis also advances research on the carnivalesque elements in organizational communication, which have been given too little attention so far in organizational research.

5.2 Ironic personae and politeness strategies

Our analysis specifically contributes to research on irony by showing how ironic personae can be linked with both humorous irony and aggressive humor. Unlike stances, which are invested with an

individual's authenticity, ironic personae are entities that can be readily and playfully created and performed in one moment, and then easily disowned or discarded in the next as 'merely joking'. They can be perceived as constructing a *liminal* discursive space in which complicated issues can be made sense of more efficiently and with less conflict than in 'straight talk' or direct stance-taking. By enabling participants to reveal initial positions on controversial decisions in humorous ways, the humor and the 'distance' displayed by the ironic persona from the speaker help mitigate the risk-to-face of such positions and thus contribute to our understanding of irony and face work within naturally occurring conversation. In the examples above, we saw how this distancing enabled the expression of irony and humor that is far more aggressive in terms of negative face, thus circumscribing the listener's ability to respond. At other times however, irony and humor enable free and constructive exchange. Hence, the three functions of testing, stretching and aligning that we have identified further supports suggestions that in some contexts, ethos-oriented ad-hominem and ad-personam irony can serve to stifle the range of response (Weizman and Dori-Hacohen, 2017: 46-7), and yet in others it can facilitate an open, creative and even grotesque sphere of interaction (Dori-Hacohen, 2016; Gardiner, 2004: 37-8).

The metaphorical concept of ironic personae can elaborate our understanding of politeness and face-saving because it provides a pragmatic vehicle for reconciling contested definitions of humorous verbal irony and aggressive conversational humor. As entities, these personae can be clearly understood as ironic because they themselves represent the necessarily and sufficient conditions of overt untruthfulness and implied negative evaluation. Nonetheless, the function they serve is to enact ironic and humorous conversation, with constant reversals and inversions of meaning, such that virtually no utterance can be accepted at face value, thus creating and maintaining the ethos of the carnival.

5.3 Ironic personae and performativity

Indeed, these 'personae' can literally function as proxies – drafted in to do the bidding of speakers to exert or speak truth to power – while the carnival prevails. As illustrated in the excerpts above, these ironic personae spontaneously emerge as new social actors that can be variously called on to pre-empt turn-taking, or deploy argumentation schemes. These ironic personae thus inject an

ambiguity to understanding, a grey area in which sense can be made by oscillation between the 'unacceptable' position and behaviour of an ironic personae and the 'acceptable' consensus of a more reasonable or straight personae – which is an interaction from which new ideas can potentially emerge. These personae are also manifested in the speakers' use of personal pronouns to implicitly bond and unify or disassociate and distance themselves from their relation to other pre-existing social actors and their responsibility for these controversial and complicated issues.

An understanding of how these personae can affect the dynamic of conversation necessarily presupposes a pragmatic-linguistic view and complements a more argumentation-oriented approach through discourse analysis. Ironic personae and their functions can also be usefully integrated with a broad range of discursive analytic approaches, such as those influenced by the Goffmanian metaphors of performance and the stage.

5.4 Future directions

Although our research has begun to conceptualise the dynamics of how ironic personae act as a pragmatic vehicle for facilitating the negotiation of issues through the three functions elaborated above, these insights also raise further questions. For example, how might this dynamic work in very different teams and cultural contexts? Can other functions of ironic personae be identified? Within a sufficiently longitudinal set of observations, do certain individuals have a propensity for particular types of ironic personae? How do ironic personae persist within organizational discourses over time? These are all questions that beg scrutiny through further research.

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